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Richard Burghart

WANDERING ASCETICS
OF THE RĀMĀNANDĪ
SECT

Most anthropologists who have carried out fieldwork in South Asia have focused their attention either on the village as a locality or on caste as an institution. In consequence, anthropological theories of Hindu asceticism have been based, for the most part, on perceptions of ascetics in relation to the world which they have renounced. Moreover, anthropological recourse to indological texts has merely confirmed the bias of fieldworking anthropologists, for most comments on the social aspects of renunciation have been derived from the prescriptive texts which were compiled by Brahman householders, or possibly eremitic householders, but not by renouncing ascetics. There is, of course, nothing wrong in observing asceticism from this point of view as long as it is recognized that this view is both a partial one as well as external to the object of study. When one considers asceticism from the ascetic's point of view, it becomes apparent, however, that the ascetic's relationship with the world which he has renounced is just one of his preoccupations and that much of the testimony of an ascetic is directed not toward householders but toward other ascetics, namely, the ascetics of his sect and the ascetics

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of rival sects. The significance of these intrasectarian and inter-sectarian relationships is overlooked when one investigates asceticism solely from the point of view of the nonascetic.

The importance of considering the ascetic's point of view may be readily demonstrated with reference to the wandering ascetic, a familiar personage in the religions of South Asia. Unlike the journeys (*yātrā*) of the householder which are defined with reference to their eventual destination (*tīrthayātrā*, *svargayātrā*, etc.), the wandering of the ascetic (*ramnā*, *phirnā*, *ghūmnā*, *gamnā*, *bicarnā*, *biharnā*; *bhraman*, *raman*, *parayan*) is defined with reference to the actual ongoing circumstances of movement so that all sense of beginning and end, here and now lose their significance. From the point of view of the householder, homeless wandering is a denial of all that which gives purpose to his terrestrial life. The householder is attached to his fields (ascetics call him not simply *grhastha* but *khetī grhastha*), his ancestral home, and his country (*deśa*) whose climate, food, and language are part of his very being. The first question which a householder asks of a stranger is, "Where do you come from?" The wandering ascetic, however, merely replies that he is "wandering" (*ghumne phirne*). He has no ancestral home to return to, no fields to cultivate, and no country to which he is attached. For the householder such itinerant movement betokens the universal experience of those individuals who have severed their connection with the society of householders. There is, however, another dimension to the ascetic's itinerant movement. Insofar as such movement serves to communicate a message, then the ascetic conceives of his itinerant movement in such a way as to communicate not only with householders, but also with other ascetics. In both cases the basic message, that of a universal experience, is the same, but in the case of communication with other ascetics the message may also contain a statement which is cast in terms of a universal experience but which expresses a particular relation between ascetics. This second dimension of movement, which is not usually perceived by householders, comprises a discourse in which rival sects advance their respective claims of spiritual superiority. From the point of view of the ascetic, therefore, the itinerant movement of an ascetic sect appears not only to be a case of wandering, but it may also be a journey with a particular aim which is acted out in the course of wandering. In this paper I shall describe and analyze some of the ideas of itinerant movement which are held by the wandering Renouncer branch of the Rāmānandī sect.

I

The Rāmānandī Sampradāya is one of the largest Hindu ascetic sects in India and Nepal today. Rāmānandī monasteries are found through-

out western and central India, the Ganges basin, the Nepalese Tarai, and the Himalayan foothills, and when the Rāmānandīs from all these regions gather together at the triennial *kumbh* festival, they vie with the Daśnāmī sect in forming the longest procession of ascetics to the bathing place.¹ Among the Rāmānandīs a variety of spiritual disciplines are practiced, one of which is called the discipline of renunciation (*tyāg*). The Rāmānandīs who practice this discipline refer to themselves as Renouncers (*tyāgī*), or even Great Renouncers (*mahātyāgī*), and they consider themselves to be separate from and superior to non-Renouncer Rāmānandīs.² A Rāmānandī becomes a Renouncer by undergoing a secondary initiation of the sect in which the novice receives from his doctrinal *guru* (*sādhak guru*) the sacred ashes. From that day onward the Renouncer smears his body twice daily with ashes from the smouldering fire (*dhūnī*). Like all Rāmānandīs, Renouncers are homeless (i.e., bereft of a *ghar*), but unlike other Rāmānandīs, who live a sedentary existence in local monasteries and hermitages, Renouncers ordinarily travel in itinerant monasteries called *khālsā* or *jamāt*. According to the Renouncers their ashes signify their separation from the transient world and their itinerant movement is a representation of the movement of the Invisible Spirit in the universe. Thus, the Renouncers see their way of life as being one which reveals to gods, saints, and men the image (*rūp*) of those individuals who travel along a path leading to the realization of the unconditioned, uncreated experience.

The itinerant way of life of the Rāmānandī Renouncers only conforms in part with the injunctions for ascetics in the Brahmanical and Buddhist codes of conduct. Although the Renouncers recognize the importance of solitude in their religious discipline, they believe that such solitude can be found within the itinerant monastery; hence they do not observe the injunction to wander in solitude as may be found in Manu (6.42) or the Khaggavisāṇasutta, every verse of which ends with the words, "let him wander alone like a rhinoceros." Renouncers do, however, observe the injunction to reside at a fixed

¹See J. N. Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), pp. 327–28.

²For the difference between Renouncers and Great Renouncers see Richard Burghart, "Renunciation in the Religious Traditions of South Asia" (paper presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London). In this paper I shall refer to both these branches of the sect as Renouncers. For more information on the Rāmānandīs see Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," *Ethnohistory* 25 (1978): 121–39; "Secret Vocabularies of the 'Great Renouncers' of the Ramanandi Sect," in *Early Hindu Devotional Literature in Current Research*, ed. W. M. Callewaert, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 8 (Leuven: Departement Orientalistiek Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1980); and "Ornaments of the 'Great Renouncers' of the Ramanandi Sect," in *The Cultural Heritage of the Indian Village*, ed. Brian Durrans (London: British Museum Publications, in press).

place during the period of "four months" (*catur mās*) and to take up their travels during the remainder of the year from mid-October to mid-June (see Gautama 3.13; Viṣṇu 96.12; Mahāvagga 3.1–14; etc.). During their eight-month period of movement the Renouncers, however, do not wander aimlessly; rather they travel back and forth across upper India and Nepal on an annual cycle which takes them to the major Vaishnavite pilgrimage centers and festivals. Moreover, the Renouncers do not observe the one-night rule of the Brahmanical codes of conduct, but instead they remain at the pilgrimage center or festival for the duration of the auspicious period, usually calculated in terms of a certain number of days of the bright or dark lunar fortnight. Their customary pattern of movement is not inflexible. A quarrel between Renouncers, a feeling that one was not treated with respect at a pilgrimage site in the past, the rumor of a large feast or sacrifice to be held elsewhere, a desire to visit a different sacred place, or the expectation of meeting a great ascetic at a different festival might occasionally provoke the abbot of an itinerant monastery to strike out in a somewhat different direction. Also, every three years their customary pattern of movement is disrupted in the late winter and early spring as they head for the month-long *kumbh* festival which is held alternately at Hardvār, Prayāg, Ujjain, and Nāsik. Otherwise Renouncers keep more or less to their annual cycle.

The Renouncers whom I met usually start up their travels on Vijay Daśamī or on Kojagarā, the full-moon day of Āśvin (September-October).³ Sometimes, however, they quit their four-month retreat a fortnight earlier to celebrate Dassarā (the first to tenth days of the bright lunar fortnight of Āśvin) at Kāśī where the King of Benares annually mounts an extravagant dramatic presentation of the life of Rām Candra for the benefit of townsmen, pilgrims, and ascetics. From Kāśī the Renouncers head for Hariharkṣetra at the confluence of the Ganges and the Gaṇḍakī rivers where they bathe on the full-moon day of Kārttik (October-November). This confluence is reputed to be the place where Viṣṇu became incarnated as a fish (Bhāg. Pur. 8.24) and also where Viṣṇu came to the rescue of an elephant who, while bathing, had been seized by a crocodile (Bhāg. Pur. 8.2–4). From Hariharkṣetra the Renouncers travel north to Janakpur in the Nepalese Tarai where they celebrate the marriage of Rām and Sītā during the first five days of the bright lunar fortnight of Mārg

³My material on the annual movement of Renouncers comes from the itinerant monasteries which pass through Janakpur in the eastern Tarai of Nepal; I would expect that the monasteries of western and central India have their own annual cycle which brings them into contact with pilgrimage centers and festivals of their own regions.

(November-December). Some of the Renouncers then head for Gaṅgā Sāgar at the mouth of the Ganges in West Bengal for the winter solstice in January (*makar saṃkrānti*). Other Renouncers travel instead to Arunachal Pradesh where they bathe at a pond called Paraśurām Kuṇḍ, situated fifty-five miles east of Saidya, where it is said Paraśurām was expiated of the sin of having exterminated the Kṣatriyas. The Renouncers reappear at Janakpur for the fourteen-day circumambulation during the bright lunar fortnight of Phālgun (February-March). Then they travel to Ayodhyā for the birthday of Rām during the first nine days of the bright lunar fortnight of Caitra (March-April). This festival also attracts Renouncers from western and central India and provides the sole annual occasion for the reunion of nearly all the itinerant monasteries of the sect. Their campsite at Ayodhyā is known as *khāk cauk*, literally the “square of dust.” Whenever I tentidiously asked a wandering Renouncer for his “fixed address,” he invariably replied, “Khāk Caur, Śrī Ayodhyā Jī.” Immediately following the celebration of the birthday of Rām the Renouncers undertake the fourteen-day circumambulation of Ayodhyā. After Ayodhyā the Renouncers eventually travel to the banks of the Ganges for Gaṅgā Daśaharā (the tenth day of the bright lunar fortnight of Jyeṣṭha which falls in early June) at which time they “cool” their smouldering fire (*dhūnī*). That is to say, every day of the year the Renouncers worship, cook upon, and warm their near-naked bodies by a smouldering log fire, but from Basant Pañcamī onward (the fifth day of the bright lunar fortnight of Māgh in January-February) the Renouncers also worship daily a smouldering fire of cow dung which is arranged in a configuration of five, seven, or eighty-four piles and in which the sun figures as the “smouldering fire” of the zenith. The worship of the smouldering fire of cow dung continues until Gaṅgā Daśaharā at which time this worship is brought to an end. Gaṅgā Daśaharā is the last major festival before the rainy season, and it is the last day of the summer that the Renouncers say that they bathe in the Ganges. I was informed, only half-seriously, that during the rainy season the Ganges becomes untouchable—the rain-swollen waters of the river being likened to the menstruation of the river goddess Gaṅgā Māi.⁴ At any rate, for whatever the reason, the Renouncers see themselves as leaving the banks of the Ganges after Gaṅgā Daśaharā and heading toward their four-month retreat.

⁴Renouncers do not identify with Hindu householders, and the belief in the menstruation of Gaṅgā Māi is thought by them to be a characteristic of householder religion. Hence this item of information was offered to me by Renouncers in the same detached and amused manner that a Western visitor might use in describing the curious customs of the Hindus.

Their next occasion for bathing in the Ganges does not occur until after the rainy season and the four months on the full-moon day of Kārttik (late October–early November) when ascetics and pilgrims bathe at Hariharkṣetra.

Although it is often said that ascetics do not travel during the rainy season, still the Renouncers' explanation for their seasonality of movement lies not with the rainy season (*varṣā*) as such, which in the Hindu calendar lasts only the months of Śrāvaṇ (July–August) and Bhādra (August–September) but with the *catur mās* (literally four months from the tenth day of the bright lunar fortnight of Aṣārḥa to the tenth day of the bright lunar fortnight of Kārttik) which lasts from mid-June to mid-October. Even here, however, the period of retreat for the Renouncers does not coincide strictly with the four months as understood by Brahman pandits and astrologers. As the Renouncers explained to me, they head toward their retreat after Gaṅgā Daśaharā in the dark lunar fortnight of Jyeṣṭha (May–June), and they start up their travels again on the festival of Vijay Daśamī in Āsvīn (September–October); thus their period of retreat begins and ends about one month earlier than the four months observed by Hindu householders. Traditionally the Renouncers pass the four months at a local rent-receiving monastery which is endowed with a sufficiently large store of grain to maintain their numbers. Sometimes an itinerant monastery may divide into smaller processions which travel to different local monasteries and then reunite after the four months. Still other Renouncers travel individually to the local monastery of their preceptor *guru* (*dīkṣā guru*). During the four months at the local monastery the Renouncers do not sleep within an enclosed chamber; rather they sleep on a veranda or in a three-walled hostel. The rationale of the seasonal retreat is explained in terms of the inauspiciousness of the four months at which time I was told that “god went underground.”⁵ I could not uncover from them a more precise explanation than this; the Renouncers were not aware of the Buddhist rationale for the rain retreat which was couched in terms of injury to young plants and animals (*Mahāvagga* 3.1.2–3), nor did they offer any ad hoc explanations in terms of the inconvenience of travel during the wet season. In spite of the Renouncers' declarations concerning their seasonality of movement, it became quite clear, in asking more particularly how individual Renouncers had passed the previous years, that their four-month retreat is not strictly observed. Several Renouncers, for example, told me that they regularly travel to Brindavan to celebrate the Swing Festival in the middle of the

⁵On this, see M. M. Underhill, *The Hindu Religious Year* (Calcutta: Association Press, 1921), p. 34.

rainy season. The inconvenience of the journey did not seem to deter them and as for the violation of the retreat rule, it is often a sign of greater spiritual achievement among ascetics to ignore the rules than to observe them. The Renouncers break their four-month retreat on Vijay Daśamī, the final day of the Dassarā festival. The abbot of the host monastery bestows on the Renouncers a small departure gift (*bidāī*) of a few rupees, some fruit, or flowers and then invites everyone to a large feast at the conclusion of which the Renouncers take their leave of the abbot and start traveling once again.

A few comments are necessary concerning the Renouncers' mode of travel. Renouncers travel, wherever possible, by train. They do not purchase their tickets, for they expect the Government of India to let holy men travel without obstruction throughout the Sacred Land of the Hindus (*bhāratavarṣa*). This expectation has rather tenuous legal precedents in the ancient period; for example, ascetics were offered toll-free passage on ferries (Manu 8.407). It is important to emphasize that the Renouncers' penchant for ticketless travel is not based on their inability to pay, for Rāmānandīs undertake no vow of poverty, and the abbot of an itinerant monastery may often carry on his person several hundred rupees or more which he has amassed in alms (*dān*) and in departure gifts (*bidāī*). At present, however, with a republican form of government in India, Renouncers encounter some opposition from ticket collectors who occasionally expel ticketless Renouncers from the train. It may appear odd to the Western mind that renouncers of the transient world should so readily accept the convenience of traveling by rail. Renouncers, however, find nothing odd about modern rail travel, and they accommodate themselves to the potential inappropriateness of this mode of transport by adopting certain rules which allow them to travel by train without violating their spiritual discipline. For example, Renouncers claim that they always remain standing in the aisle of the railway carriage, for the act of taking one's seat has a ritual significance such that its performance in a train would be inappropriate. Also the daily observance of certain ritual duties, such as bathing with water and with ashes, obliges the Renouncers to refrain from traveling during the day; instead they board the train in the early evening, travel during the night, and break their journey at dawn. They find a temple or body of water near the railway station where they perform their daily rituals and then they resume their journey on the evening train.

II

In reporting and interpreting their field observations, anthropologists do not often attribute a methodological or theoretical significance to

the fact that their observations of thought and behavior are based in large measure upon the oral testimony of informants. Similarly, in citing passages from indigenous texts with a view to illuminating or illustrating the ethnographic data, anthropologists do not often consider the fact that the text itself was produced in a discourse which may not necessarily overlap the anthropologist's discourse with his informants. In brief, given the verbal nature of most ethnographic data, it is essential that some account be given of the structure and boundary of the discourse in which the data are fixed.

Such an account is especially important in an analysis of the wandering ascetic, for there is more to itinerant movement than meets the eye and, as I shall demonstrate, the meaning of the movement shifts with the situation. In talking to me about their way of life, Renouncers mentioned that itinerant movement is a religious vow which the individual Renouncer might undertake, and both Renouncers and householders told me that terrestrial wandering is an observable representation (*rūp*) of the mental state of the liberated ascetic.⁶ For the most part, however, the Renouncers did not dwell upon the significance of wandering for the individual ascetic; instead wandering was significant for them as an observable representation of the liberated ascetic in relation to other people who either wander or do not wander. In particular, there were three categories of persons who were implicated in the talk of Renouncers about movement. First, in talking of their wandering, Renouncers distinguished themselves from householders who are attached to their ancestral homes, their fields, and their country. Second, the Renouncers stated that wandering entails an act of renunciation which is greater than the renunciation of sedentary ascetics and thus they claimed their superiority over sedentary Rāmānandīs living in local monasteries. Third, in recounting stories of the precedence of Renouncer processions at religious festivals, the Renouncers claimed their superiority over the ascetics, both wandering and sedentary, of rival sects. Thus, the Renouncers talk about their wandering in such a way as to represent ritually the form of the ascetic who is liberated from the transient world and at the same time to demarcate social boundaries

⁶I did not, however, hear Renouncers talk of perpetual movement as a normative injunction incumbent upon the ascetic even though many householders told me that ascetics ought to lead a life of homeless wandering and similarly the codes of conduct devised by Brahman householders are quite explicit on this point (Manu 6.42; Gautama 3.21; Viṣṇu 96.12; Vāsiṣṭha 10.22; Āpastamba 2.9.22.2). Nor did I hear a Renouncer impute instrumentality to his wandering; perpetual movement was not seen as a means of creating a state of nonattachment even though in the classic system of yoga other ascetic vows, such as the vow of sexual abstinence, were thought to be instrumental in one's release from conditional existence (Patañjali 2.30–39).

and to claim by virtue of their renunciation their superiority over other people within the social world.

These claims of superiority over other persons in the social world are especially apparent in the ideas which Renouncers represent in terms of their itinerant movement. By idea, or meaning, of itinerant movement I refer to the way in which the Renouncer's self-image and the actual circumstances of his roaming are related to a cosmic conception of the terrestrial world. These ideas of movement were not listed for me, as such, in conceptual terms by the Renouncers and Vaishnavite bards (*bhūrā bhaṭṭ*) who were my informants; rather the ideas were embedded in their vows, sayings, and legends about wandering, and from my analysis emerged four formally distinct ideas: circulation within the universe, encirclement of the universe, movement at will, and roaming for pleasure. I should emphasize that the formal distinctness of these ideas does not entail any exclusivity of reference. A Renouncer might characterize the same actual movement in terms of all four ideas, although in the context of any particular social situation he would be likely to give emphasis to only one such idea. I have chosen to describe them in a formally distinct manner so that in the third part of this essay one might relate idea to context by considering itinerant movement as a topic of discourse in which different ascetic traditions advance universal and particular claims in relation to one another.

The first three ideas of movement—circulation within the universe, encirclement of the universe, and movement at will—are based upon the identification of the Sacred Land of the Hindus with the totality of the cosmos. According to Puranic geography, the terrestrial world was likened to a circular disc with Mount Meru at the center (its summit being likened to the zenith of the universe) and the *lokāloka* mountains along the circumference (see Bhāg. Pur. 5.16–20). Beyond the perimeter of this terrestrial world lie other worlds, but those worlds are inhabited by evil spirits living in darkness. The sun is said not to shine there. Along the perimeter of the world in the east, south, west, and north stand the guardian deities; between Mount Meru and the *lokāloka* mountains lie seven continents in the form of seven concentric islands. Each island is subdivided into seven parts (*varṣa*). The southern part of the innermost island (*jambūdvīp*) is called *bhāratavarṣa*, for it is the part which was ruled in the distant past by King Bhārat. Bhārat's kingdom is said to have been delimited by the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Tibetan plateau, and within this territory Bhārat performed more than a thousand horse sacrifices (ŚB 13.5.4.13). This, therefore, is the Sacred Land of the Hindus because it is the land the fruits of which

have been tasted in sacrifice by the gods. Although this sacred land comprises only a seventh part of a seventh part of the terrestrial world, it was also identified with the totality of the auspicious terrestrial world. The Sacred Land of the Hindus was seen to comprise the “whole earth” and was surrounded by the four seas, the Tibetan plateau being likened to a “sea of sand.”⁷ The guardian deities of the four quarters were moved inward from the *lokāloka* mountains and took their place at the four *dhām* situated along the perimeter of the sacred land at the four points of the compass: Jagannāth Purī in the east, Rāmeśvar in the south, Dvārakā in the west, and Badrināth in the north. There appears to have been little agreement concerning the center of the universe within *bhāratavarṣa*, for each sect seems to have claimed the center for itself—either locating it at the monastery of its sectarian founder, such as Raṅganāth for the Śrī sect, or at a sacred place of its tutelary deity, such as Govardhan Mountain which is likened to Mount Meru by the Vallabhites. It is within this Sacred Land of the Hindus that the Renouncers, as well as the itinerant ascetics of other Hindu sects, are said to wander.

The first idea of itinerant movement is that of going round or circulating within (*ghūmnā*, *phirnā*, *bhramaṇ karnā*) the universe. This notion further entails the idea of pervading the universe. According to this conception, the universe has a moving center and the ability of the center to move is a sign of its liberation from the ties of conditioned existence. For the Rāmānandī Renouncers this moving center which circulates within and pervades the Sacred Land of the Hindus is the autonomous itinerant monastery of liberated ascetics. The notion of the moving center may be illustrated by the following saying which was recited to me by a Vaishnavite bard at a Renouncer campsite:

The abbot of the four quarters is the *ṭoknā*;
 The sergeant-at-arms of the four quarters is the *veisākhī*.
 The fruit of the four quarters is *ārī*.
 The god of the four quarters is the *śālagrām*.

The four quarters (*dhām*) refer, of course, to the territory which these four cardinal points enclose, namely, the Sacred Land of the Hindus, and in this saying the equipment and procedures of the itinerant monastery are seen to be the moving “fifth point” which orders that territory. The abbot is the *ṭoknā*, the iron pot in which the chief

⁷See D. C. Sircar, *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1960), p. 8.

worshipper (*pūjārī*) cooks the rice to be eaten by the members of the monastery. The sergeant at arms (*koṭvāl*) is the *veisākhī*, a two-foot-long wooden pole with a slightly curved iron blade at the end which Renouncers use to scrape all the grass and weeds from their campsite. Both the iron pot and the *veisākhī* serve to define the boundary of the monastery. The iron pot delimits the social body of the monastery and the *veisākhī* delimits the territory of the monastery campsite. Within this space the Renouncers worship the *śālagrām*, a stone of black ammonite found in the upper reaches of the Kālī Gaṇḍakī river which the Renouncers believe to be a manifestation of Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇ. By identifying the Sacred Land of the Hindus with the body of the monastery, the Renouncers are also declaring that they pervade that territory and move freely within it. In this first notion of itinerant movement, therefore, the monastery of Renouncers is conceived as a worshipping worshipful body which circulates within the Sacred Land of the Hindus in a similar way that the Invisible Spirit, or Brahma, is said to circulate within or pervade the mind-born universe.

A second notion of itinerant movement is the encirclement of the Sacred Land of the Hindus. This notion has both an individual and an intrasectarian significance for Rāmānandīs. Renouncers frequently state to one another that it is their solemn vow to visit all four quarters (*dhām*) at least once in their lifetime. The journey is said to take twelve years. In fact, it takes considerably less than this, even on foot, but it is said to take twelve years because twelve years is a *yuga*, the cyclical period of the universe in which the benefits of a vow are said to come to fruition. The encirclement of the Sacred Land of the Hindus starts in the east at Jagannāth Purī then proceeds "sunwise," or what we would call clockwise, to Rāmeśvar in the south, Dvārakā in the west, and Badrināth in the north. The idea of encircling the universe implies further that the universe has a fixed center which for Rāmānandīs is Ayodhyā from where Lord Rām ruled in the Tretā Age and from where his influence, even now, is said to pervade the universe. I have already mentioned that the one sectarian festival which unites all Renouncers is the birthday of Lord Rām at Ayodhyā and that the fixed address of the itinerant Renouncers is Khāk Cauk in Ayodhyā. By conflating the Sacred Land of the Hindus with the universe, the encirclement of the sacred land came to signify the ascetic's attainment of liberation. Or, to restate the matter in rather classical terms, the universe is the field of influence (*kṣetra*) of Brahma which is pervaded from the zenith by Brahma. It is clearly impossible for any finite being to encircle this incomprehensibly immense field of influence. Hence the vow to encircle the universe can

only be fulfilled by someone who has realized Brahma within himself. Only Brahma can encompass Brahma. Thus the encirclement of the Sacred Land of the Hindus signifies the realization of Brahma and the attainment of liberation.⁸ In fact, I have never met a Renouncer who has encircled the Sacred Land of the Hindus by passing through the four cardinal points, and even though most of the Renouncers had visited the three *dhām* of upper India at Dvārakā, Badrināth, and Jagannāth Purī, their visits were separate so that the route of their travels did not link the three places in a consecutive semicircular pattern. Such shortcomings in actuality, however, are made good by the bards. Legendary Renouncers of the past as well as any great ascetic who is hailed by the title of universal *guru* (*jagadguru*) is usually said to have traveled to the four quarters in a consecutive circular journey, regardless of whether he actually did so in the course of his terrestrial life.

A third notion of itinerant movement among the Renouncers is the movement at will of their tutelary deity. According to this conception Rām Candra is a monarch who rules the universe from his celestial seat at Vaikuṇṭha. When Lord Rām left Ayodhyā during the Tretā Age he delegated his authority over the terrestrial world to his faithful servant Hanumān, the monkey god. The Rāmānandī Renouncers take themselves to be Rām's guards and, holding aloft the parasol, fly whisk, and victory banner of Rām, together with a red standard as an emblem of Hanumān, they form a royal procession (*julūs*) which moves at will throughout the Sacred Land of the Hindus proclaiming the victory of Rām over time (*kāl*). This representation of movement is expressed in a recent sectarian account of the life of Śrī Maṅgal Dās who founded the Dākori Khālsā in the late eighteenth century:

In your presence the atrocities committed by the Muslims were brought to an end. Having taken a vow to defend Mother Cow, Brahmans, and Vaishnavite saints, you travelled from place to place installing Hanumān temples. You caused the victory banner of the pure devotion of our Universal Monarch and Ocean of Happiness Śrī Sītārām Jī to flutter in the breeze. By the grace of Śrī Hanumān Jī you obtained an otherworldly and indestructible power. . . . In Mandor [in Mālāvā] you conquered the Mughal Emperor Aurāṅgēb with your remarkable power. The Emperor bent down on his knees and, touching your feet in obeisance, bestowed upon you a royal order inscribed in copper

⁸Pious Buddhists and Hindus regularly circumambulate pilgrimage centers, temples, holy men, and auspicious trees. Such objects are also universal contexts, but it is unlikely that a devotee would claim to have realized Brahma merely by the encirclement of it. Rather he would probably state that he is showing respect to the object by encircling it with the auspicious right side of his body turned in its direction.

authorizing you to wander [*paryāṭan*] freely throughout the Sacred Land of the Hindus holding aloft the parasol and the fly whisk and dressed in the form of a Preceptor of Dharma.⁹

The conception of Rām's eternal presence being a royal conquest of time implies that all creatures who are ensnared in conditioned existence are subordinate to Rām. Moreover, the ability of Rām's procession to move freely throughout the terrestrial world is a representation of his autonomy from conditioned existence and hence his overlordship of the universe. Other deities might be conceived as monarchs, but they were thought to occupy a subordinate or peripheral position with respect to Rām Candra, the universal monarch, whose celestial palace is situated at the zenith of the universe. Given such a conception of the universal order, any obstruction of a Renouncer procession by a rival sectarian procession was understood by Renouncers as a challenge to Rām Candra's claim of overlordship. Such challenges were relatively frequent during the eighteenth century, for Rāmānandī Renouncers were not the only ascetic sect to be entitled to travel throughout the South Asian subcontinent. There is evidence that groups of Muslim fakirs were authorized to travel in procession throughout the Mughal realm, and it is likely that the Daśnāmī Sannyāsīs were similarly entitled. For the ascetics of these various sects there could be many victory processions of the same universal monarch, but there could not be many victory processions of different universal monarchs. Conflict and obstruction were bound to ensue because of the exclusive nature of the claim to a territorial domain.¹⁰ The obstruction became particularly violent on the occasion of calendrical festivals which attracted ascetics of diverse sects, all of whom sought to bathe at the most auspicious time and place of the

⁹This account was written in the 1940s. I suspect that the Vaishnavite Brahman author reinterpreted the time of Maṅgal Dās in the light of the pre-Independence Hindu-Muslim disturbances in Ayodhyā provoked by the Rāmānandī campaign to have cow slaughter banned from within their holy city. As the 1813 settlement from the Court of Peshwa shows (p. 374), the Daśnāmī Sannyāsīs were the ascetics who probably obstructed the movement of Maṅgal Dās. I have taken this account of Maṅgal Dās from "Ācāryapād Śrī 1008 Jagadguru Śrī Maṅgal Dās Jī Mahārāj," *Jagruti*, pt. 3, n.d., pp. 158–59, esp. p. 159. The copperplate inscription referred to in the account is reported to be kept at the Rāmānandī monastery at Ḍākor, Gujarat.

¹⁰On the authorized processions of Muslim fakirs throughout the Mughal realm, see Rai Sahi Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1930), p. 22. Contemporary accounts of conflicts between Hindu sects over territorial domains may be found in Thomas Hardwicke, "Narrative of a Journey to Sirinagar," *Asiatick Researches* 6 (1799): 309–47, esp. 316–19; and F. V. Raper, "Narrative of a Survey for the Purpose of Discovering the Source of the Ganges," *Asiatick Researches* 11 (1810): 446–563, esp. 455.

festival.¹¹ Although most of these battles involved the militant orders of the Hindu sects, still the Rāmānandī Renouncer processions were also involved. A copperplate inscription from the court of Peshwa dated 1813 records the following battle between the Śaivite Sannyāsīs and Vaishnavite Bairāgīs at the 1789 Nāsik *kumbh* festival:

In 1789 the four sects founded by Rāmānand, Nimbārka, Viṣṇuswāmī, and Mādhvācārya and formed into fifty-two spiritual clans and seven militant orders battled at the Kāśī Saṅgam on the Godāvrī river [near Nāsik] and in the course of the battle twelve thousand ascetics died, the standard of the Khākī militant order was cut in half, and Purā Dās Bhaṭṭ [an itinerant Vaishnavite Brahman genealogist] was killed. Abbot Dayā Rām Dās of the Khākī militant order went to Nāgā Puruṣottam Dās of Citrakūṭ and together they fought at the Peshwa Court whereupon the Court ordered that from 1801 the Bairāgīs shall bathe at the Nāsik Rām Kuṇḍ and the Gosains [Sannyāsīs] shall bathe at the Trimuk Kuśāvrat.¹²

Among the signatories of the agreement between the Bairāgīs and the Sannyāsīs were the abbots of the Nirvāṇī, Digambar, Khākī, and Nirmohī militant orders, as well as the Renouncer whose biography was noted earlier, Srī Mahant Maṅgal Dās Muṃjīyā, the founder of the Ḍākora Khālsā.

I should add that such disputes among sects over precedence in bathing virtually ceased with the establishment of pax britannica on the subcontinent and at present all matters relating to the location of ascetic campsites and procession routes as well as the assignment of precedence in bathing are regulated by state governments in the light of the customary arrangements of the ascetics.¹³ Even though the Renouncers carry in their processions the regalia of the universal monarch Rām Candra, they no longer translate the spiritual autonomy of their Lord into such imperial terms, and most Renouncer disputes

¹¹During the latter part of the eighteenth century pilgrimage routes doubled as commercial routes and some of the Daśnāmī monasteries also served as banking institutions loaning both money and troops to local kings. Thus, it is likely that the battles between Śaivite and Vaishnavite ascetics were provoked not only by competition for precedence in religious processions but also for the economic rewards of control over pilgrimage centers. For more information see Bernard Cohn, "The Role of the Gosains in the Economy of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Upper India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 1, no. 4 (1964): 175–82; David Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98 (1978): 61–75; and Jadunath Sarkar, *A History of the Dasnami Naga Sanyasis* (Allahabad: Sri Pancayati Akhara Mahanirvani, n.d.).

¹²A facsimile of this copperplate inscription has been published in *Jagriti* 10 (1945): 896–97.

¹³See P. N. Chaturvedi, *Report on the Ardh Kumbh Mela, Allahabad 1960* (Allahabad: Superintendent of Printing and Stationary, Uttar Pradesh, 1961).

over precedence at the recent major calendrical festivals are intra-sectarian, not intersectarian, in character.

The fourth idea of itinerant movement, roaming for pleasure (*ramnā, bihār karnā*), is unlike the first three ideas in that the universe is not identified with the territory of the South Asian subcontinent. Instead there are two other universal contexts of this idea, namely, the ascetic's body as a microcosm and the celestial abode of the tutelary deity. According to the first context, which remounts at least to the Upanishadic period (see Chān. Up. 7.25.2), the experience of liberation is characterized by freedom of movement and feelings of pleasure. Such movement is not necessarily itinerant, for the liberated ascetic can apparently experience such freedom of movement within the universe without actually displacing his body (Br. Ār. Up. 2.1.18). Nevertheless, among itinerant ascetics of various Hindu sects, roaming for pleasure is used not only to describe the liberated state but also to impute this spiritual state to those who actually roam upon a territory, namely, the itinerant ascetics themselves. This notion also has currency outside the ascetic tradition, for in the Muluki Ain (88.1), the first legal code of modern Nepal promulgated in 1854, the word *ramtā* appears as a generic term for all itinerant ascetics, regardless of their sectarian affiliation.

Among the Rāmānandī Renouncers, however, the equivalence between itinerant movement and roaming for pleasure is complicated by the devotional belief that Rām Candra roamed for pleasure in the course of his terrestrial incarnation during the Tretā Age. Certain places associated with events in the life of Rām are known to Rāmānandīs as celestial abodes (*divya dhām*) where Lord Rām engages in eternal play. These events include the birth of Rām, his childhood play, and his eventual rule at Ayodhyā (Uttar Pradesh), his marriage with Sītā at Janakpur (Dhanuṣa District, Nepal), his exile to the forests of Citrakūṭ (Uttar Pradesh); plus various minor events, such as the place of Sītā's birth (Sītāmarhī, Bihar); the place of Rām's release of Ahalyā, who had been literally petrified by her husband Gautuma (Ahalyāsthān, Bihar); and the place where Rām expiated the sin of having killed the Brahman Rāvaṇa (Hatyaharaṇ Kuṇḍ, near Naimiśaraṇya, Uttar Pradesh). The first three mentioned abodes, namely, Ayodhyā, Janakpur, and Citrakūṭ, are particularly important Rāmānandī centers. Even though these three abodes are based on geographically local and historically unique events, nonetheless each of them has been universalized in the concept of the hidden Ayodhyā, Janakpur, and Citrakūṭ which are the celestial abodes in which the tutelary deity's eternal play takes place. In the case of the hidden Ayodhyā the universality is based upon the idea of Rām as the

universal monarch; at Janakpur the universality is based upon the union of the male spirit (*puruṣa*) and female nature (*prakṛti*) symbolized in the marital union of Rām and Sītā. At these celestial abodes the devotees of Rām are said to roam for pleasure when they come into contact with their tutelary deity Rām Candra. Roaming for pleasure in this devotional context, however, does not distinguish the itinerant Renouncer from other devotees of Rām, for all devotees—both celibate and householder, itinerant and sedentary—are said to roam for pleasure at the celestial abode of their redeeming deity.

III

Although the social distinctions and claims of superiority which Renouncers advance in terms of their movement may be honored, rejected, or treated with bemusement by others, nevertheless there is evidence that householders, sedentary Rāmānandīs, and the ascetics of rival sects also discuss such statements, and that the topic of itinerant movement operates within a field of discourse which is considerably larger than the campsites of the itinerant Rāmānandīs themselves. This field comprises not only contemporary Hindu ascetics and householders but also ascetics and householders in South Asia over the last three millenia. A cursory review of the sacred literature from the ancient period reveals that similar ideas of movement were attributed to the Brahmanical *saṃnyāsin*, the Jain *yati*, and the Buddhist *bhikkhu*. For example, Buddhist mendicants, like the Rāmānandī Renouncers, were said to wander freely or to circulate within the universe because in their state of liberation they did not cling to anything (Mahāvagga 4.13). The idea of the encirclement of the universe was also present in the ancient period, for it was contained in the more complex form of the Buddha's conquest of the universe (Mahāsudassanasutta 1.11–20). With regard to the victory procession of the tutelary deity, Buddhist monks were said to go on royal processions proclaiming the victory of their Redeemer over death. In these processions the *bhikkhus* were likened to an army which the Buddha recruited in the course of his peregrinations (Mahāvagga 2.20–21) and who wandered about victorious (Mahāvagga 4.14) after he had crushed the army of Māra, the King of Death (Mahāvagga 7.14). Moreover, one must note that certain nonascetics also held ideas of movement which are similar in meaning to those of the Rāmānandī Renouncers. Brahman householders who espouse the classical interpretation of the entitlements of the *varṇa* system claim their superior status on the basis of the circulation of Brahma within the universe. They do not represent this movement, however, in terms of terrestrial wandering; rather they have recourse

to other representations, such as that of lordship. For example, the universe is a manifestation of Brahma and, as such, Brahma is said to circulate within this universe. Brahmins are the embodiment of Brahma; therefore they are the lords of all creation (Manu 1.93–101), the powers of the lesser *varṇa* being constituted within and encompassed by the category of Brahman. Or to cite another example, the movement at will of the Renouncer processions is based upon an idea of royal movement which achieved an early formulation in the roaming at will of the sacrificial horse (ŚB 13.5.4.22). The successful completion of the sacrifice was thought to restore completeness to the autonomous king—completeness both in the territorial sense of his overlordship and in his atonement for the sins incurred in the conquest of that territory (ŚB 13.3.1.1). In spite of the institutional disappearance from South Asia of the Vedic horse sacrifice, movement at will is just as much an attribute of kingship during the Hindu period. Such movement, for example, is found among the reigning dynasty in Nepal in both the rituals of royal consecration¹⁴ and their institution of the royal tour (*daudaha*).

Although Renouncer ideas of movement can be found in both ascetic and nonascetic discourse, it is significant, however, that in ascetic discourse these ideas are present as alternate ways of construing events involving the same person, whereas among Hindu householders these ideas are used in a mutually exclusive way to construe the authority of different persons: circulation within the universe being interpreted in terms of the Brahman being a lord of creation vis à vis non-Brahmins and the movement at will of the royal procession being interpreted in terms of the king's exclusive authority over a territory vis à vis other kings. In other words, it is not the representations or even the ideas of movement which can be labeled ascetic or nonascetic, but instead the relation between ideas which can be so labeled. The fact that these various ideas of movement are not mutually exclusive for ascetics is further supported by the observation that ideas of both brahmanhood and kingship are combined in the Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu sectarian traditions. It is well-known that the Buddha was said to have considered himself a king: "I am a king, O Sela, an incomparable religious king (*dharmarājan*), with justice (*dhama*) I turn the wheel, a wheel that is irresistible" (Mahāvagga 7.7). The Buddha, however, also took himself to be a Brahman. His criterion of brahmanhood was not of birth; rather "the one who is possessed of nothing and seizes upon nothing, him I call Brahman" (Mahāvagga 9.27). This apparent contradiction of being at

¹⁴See Harṣanāth Bhaṭṭarāi, "Śubha Rājyābhiṣek Paramparā ra Paddhati," in *Śubhrājyābhiṣek Viseṣaṃk*, ed. Gopāl Prasād Bhaṭṭarāi (Kathmandu: Gorkhapatra, 1975).

once a king and a Brahman was unusual enough to have perplexed King Milinda and to have led him to question his preceptor in this regard (Milinda 48). It is also this combination of kingly and brahmanical status which underlies the conquest of the universe (*digvijaya*) in which the Buddha turned the wheel of *dharma* from the east to the south to the west to the north receiving the obeisance of local rulers and preaching the moral precepts of Buddhism (Mahā-sudassanasutta 1.11–20). In the Buddha's conquest of the universe are combined both the king's movement at will (ŚB 13.5.4.22) and the sun's Brahma-like encirclement of the universe (ŚB 1.9.3.13–23; 4.3.4.9–10; etc.). By turning the wheel in the face of potential obstruction the Buddha signified his overlordship as a preceptor of the *dharma*, and by turning the wheel in a sunwise manner around the universe he signified his realization of brahmanhood. In sum, ideas of movement which were associated with brahmanhood and kingship were combined in the Buddhist tradition to form one complex idea of movement acted out by one person, the spiritual overlord. This combination of ideas is also found among the Jains, as well as the Hindu sectarian traditions of medieval India, such as the Dasnāmī Sannyāsīs, the Rāmānandīs, and the Nimbārkīs.¹⁵

The question still remains why these ideas of movement should exist in an alternative or overlapping sense in ascetic traditions but in a separate and mutually exclusive sense in the classical *varṇa* system of householders. I believe that the answer lies with the similar problem which the ascetics have tried to resolve but which has not been a problem for Hindu householders in the *varṇa* system. In brief, the problem is that each sectarian movement was founded by an ascetic who discovered and preached an ever-present message but whose discovery and spiritual vocation was thought by his followers to be a unique and unrepeatable event in durational time. The followers of the Buddha, Mahāvīr, Śaṅkar, Rāmānand, and other saints have sought to combine in the person of their founder an abiding achronic event with a unique discontinuous event. Such a problem did not arise for the members of the *varṇa* system because they claimed their status was established at the dawn of time when the four *varṇa*—Brāhmaṇ, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra—emerged from the mouth, arms, thighs, and feet of the eternal Brahma. Thus,

¹⁵On the Dasnāmī Sannyāsīs, see Sarkar, pp. 4–16; on the Rāmānandīs, see Badrīnārāyaṇ Śrīvāstava, *Rāmānand Sampradāya tathā Hindī Sāhitya par uskā Prabhāva* (Prayāg: Prayāg Viśvavidyālaya [Hindī Paṭiśad], 1957), pp. 4–12; and Svāmī Bhagavadācārya, *Śrīrāmānandadigvijayah* (Ahmadābād: Adhyāpikā Śrīcandan Devī, 1967); on the Nimbārkīs, see Kuñj Bihārī Śaraṇ, *Śrī Ācārya Caritāvalī* (Calcutta: Hanuman Prasad Dhanuka, 1979), verses 144 ff., although in this case Nimbārka appears as the spoiler of a rival's attempted universal conquest.

any actual changes in the status of individuals or groups within the *varṇa* system would have to be conceived chronologically as a restoration of one's original status in this prototypical order, as is the case of caste movements whereby the upwardly mobile family or subcaste seeks not to be "upgraded" in status but "reinstated" to its original status. Such claims of reinstatement usually entail historical arguments in which an event or mistake of the legendary or genealogical past is resolved in such a way as to allow one to be reinstated to one's original position.¹⁶ The founders of sectarian movements, however, made their spiritual discovery in the course of durational time, not at the origin of time; hence they are basically interested in the ever-present order, not the original order.¹⁷ For an ascetic circulation within the universe, encirclement of the universe, and roaming for pleasure are inclusive ideas of movement which express the dissolution of the individual in the ever-present uncreated order. In the case of the establishment of a sect, such individual dissolution serves to validate the sectarian founder's claim that his spiritual discipline effectively releases the individual from the bonds of conditioned existence. Such ideas concerning the ascetic's relation with the achronic order are incapable, however, of expressing a reordered relation in time among the ascetics of rival sects, for all ascetics make similar claims of their inclusion within this order. The expression of a unique claim vis à vis rival sectarian leaders can only be cast in terms of an exclusive idea of movement. Such an idea existed in the king's movement at will in the terrestrial world. The wandering ascetic who moved at will with his Redeemer upon the Indian subcontinent expressed a claim of autonomous lordship and tested this claim of lordship every time his path crossed that of another claimant. In overlapping or combining the ideas of circulation within the universe,

¹⁶See, e.g., the argumentation concerning the "reinstatement" of Shiva Ji (Jadunath Sarkar, *Shivaji and His Times* [Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar & Sons, 1929], pp. 209–10), Jang Bahadur Rana (Satish Kumar, *Rana Polity in Nepal* [London: Asia Publishing House, 1967], pp. 158–59), and the Rajvamshis of the eastern Tarai of Nepal ("Customs and Usages of Rajvamshis in Morang," *Regmi Research Series* 5, no. 3 [1973]: 48).

¹⁷Having established their autonomy as a sect, various factions within a religious tradition may attempt to establish their primacy over other factions by claiming that they are part of an original order. E.g., the Vaishnavite sects of upper India thought of themselves as being members of the "four sectarian traditions" (*catuḥ sampradāya*). According to Rāmānandī sources these four traditions are the Rāmānandīs, Nimbārkīs, Viṣṇusvāmīs, and Mādhvācāryas (see p. 374). Each sect, known by the name of its historical founder, dates from the medieval period, yet the four sects are also said to have been "set in motion" (*calānā*) at the dawn of time by the four mind-born sons of Brahmā, namely, Sanak, Sanandan, Sanātan, and Sanatkumār. Such a classification, predated to the dawn of time, served as a method of closure depriving other Vaishnavite sects of autonomy and obliging them to affiliate genealogically through one of the "original" four sectarian traditions.

encirclement of the universe, and movement at will, the Renouncer followers of Rāmānand, as well as the followers of other sectarian leaders, overlap the inclusive with the exclusive in order to express in universal terms a particular relationship among ascetics.

This conclusion returns one to the point with which I began this essay, namely, the inadequacy of analyzing asceticism from the point of view of the world which ascetics renounce. In renouncing the transient world, Renouncers negate certain forms of behavior, such as householdership and sedentary monastic existence, and in this negation lies both their claim of being separate from transient existence and their claim of circulating within the Sacred Land of the Hindus in the form of the Invisible Spirit. Such negation, however, cannot adequately account for the phenomenon of asceticism, for its importance as a relation lies primarily in the ascetic's relation with non-ascetics and in his relation with the other divisions of ascetics within his sect. In the ascetic's relation with the ascetics of other sects, negation need not figure as a dominant idea, for, after all, negation cannot be used to reorder relations among persons, all of whom recognize themselves to be negators.¹⁸ In the context of intersectarian discourse, therefore, other ideas become important. In this essay I have isolated one such idea: the ascetics of rival sects, rather than negate social relationships of the transient world, may overlap or combine such relationships in a symbolic manner (in this case the Brahman and the king) in order to assert a reordered relationship in durational time among persons who represent ritually a world beyond durational time.

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¹⁸ Different sects apprehend differently the way in which transience pervades both social and physical existence and hence the way in which the ascetic, by severing certain social or physical relationships, can free himself from the transient world. In negating different apprehensions of transience, relations of difference are created among sects. E.g., the Brahmanical *saṃnyāsīn* wore a loincloth of cast-off clothing signifying his indifference to those material objects to which householders are attached (Manu 6.44). The Rāmānandī Renouncers, however, wear a loincloth fashioned from the inner bark of the banana tree thereby signifying that they are outside the domestic world maintained by sacrifice in which woven but unstitched cotton garments are appropriate. Both rag and bark loincloths represent similarly the negation of transience, yet each loincloth stands in a relation of difference to the other by virtue of its being opposed to different ascetic perceptions of the form of transience. Thus, negation may serve as a means of construing relations of difference among sects. Such negation, however, usually entails social separation and for this reason may not necessarily serve as an adequate means of reordering relations among sects.